



# THE PHILIPPINE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, ISSUES, AND PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

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## ABSTRACT

Language plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process. It is a powerful tool a learner could use to comprehend and learn. However, the persistent debate whether to utilize English or the mother tongue (vernacular or first language of the child) as the medium of instruction has created havoc in the educational arena, especially the non-English speaking countries like the Philippines. The purpose of this paper is to present a brief historical background on the language policy of the Philippine educational system and its issues; a review on the importance of language in education, and the different philosophical underpinnings relative to the use of mother tongue vis-a-vis the English language as a medium of instruction.

**KEYWORDS:** Language, medium of instruction, mother tongue, English language, Philippines.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Language is, without a doubt, the most significant invention of men (Valeriano, 2015). Studies indicate that children's language can be a powerful tool to comprehend and learn (e.g., Cuéllar & Blanco, 2018; Valeriano, 2015). But with so much diversity around the world having 7,000-8,000 languages actively used (Pagel, 2011), there is a need to have one language to unify all of these diversities.

At present, the English language is the unifying factor, but it poses a problem in non-English speaking countries. Extensive research has shown that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction proved effective than the use of the English language (e.g., Garbes, 2012). However, in the world's arena, the skill to communicate in English is deemed essential (Koo, 2008). With these conflicting views, the academic community is divided, and the medium of instruction becomes a heated issue – and the Philippines is no exception.

### 2. THE PHILIPPINE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION: THE GREAT DIVIDE:

For several decades now, the medium of instruction in the Philippine educational system is the subject of countless arguments and it is a "recurring nightmare" (Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2009, p.18). This perennial debate could be considered as the Great Divide. Dividing all stakeholders and creating havoc in Philippine education.

This issue could be traced back to the time of the Spanish colonization (Koo, 2008). For more than three decades Spanish was used as the medium of instruction in school which only few could understand – particularly only the elites or the *ilustrados*. Filipinos at that time were forbidden to go to school for fear that they would rebel against their Spanish masters (Bernabe, 1978).

During the time of the Americans, U.S. Pres. McKinley in 1900 established English as the medium of instruction (Bernardo, 2009) for two reasons: (a) teachers were American soldiers and (b) the Philippines is divided into a myriad of languages and dialects (Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2009). English then was a powerful tool that would unify the country (Martin, 1999). However, evaluation of the status of education at that time (e.g., the 1925 Monroe Survey) showed poor results in the language performance (Koo, 2008).

In 1945 when the Philippines secured its independence, it continued to utilize English as the medium of instruction. However, there were experiments conducted in the use of mother tongue like the Aguilar Study in 1949-1954, which proved that learners learned better in the vernacular (Koo, 2008). Consequently, the Philippine education introduced the use of Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) in 1974, utilizing both Filipino and English in elementary and secondary levels (Bernardo, 2009). Then in 1957 the Revised Philippine Education (RPEP) was introduced implementing the use of vernacular in primary grades and English was taught as a subject only in Grade 3 through college (Koo, 2008).

After a decade of implementation of BEP, it was evaluated in 1985 and showed better results for Tagalog-speaking regions which utilized the Filipino language as a medium of instruction, the mother tongue of these students (Gonzalez & Sibayan, 1988). These findings paved the way to the formation of the 1991 Congressional Commission for Education (EDCOM). It advised all subjects, except English, to be taught in Filipino (Koo, 2008). The debate on this was so intense that this was never implemented. Koo mentioned that the president at that time, Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, issued an Executive Order to reinforce English. This was supported by the Gullas Bill emphasizing that when Bilingual Educa-

tion Policy of the Philippine educational system was introduced, the learning of the English language was derailed (Gullas, 2003).

Opposing this Bill was the Gunigundo Bill espousing "the use of mother tongue in all of elementary education" (Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2009, p. 21). This Bill was re-filed in 2010 and with the support of researches (e.g., Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2009) it was finally ratified. Hence, last June 2012, the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) was implemented in all public schools as part of the K to 12 Basic Education Program (Valeriano, 2015); but still, the debate continues in all fronts of the Philippine educational system.

### 3. PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS:

The following are the philosophical theories which underpin the utilization of mother tongue as medium of instruction. Advantages of employing English are also presented and discussed.

#### 3.1 The Vernacular School:

The use of mother tongue or vernacular language in school is not a new phenomenon. The root could be traced back during the time of the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther posted his famous 95 Theses to the church door of Wittenberg. This caused the need to translate the Bible from Latin to the vernacular language (which was exactly what Martin Luther did), addressing the demand of the common people to understand the real truth written in the Holy Book. Importantly, the Protestants emphasized the need for universal education and established the elementary vernacular schools in Germany (Gutek, 2011).

Another proponent was John Amos Comenius; he developed the philosophy "Pansophism" meaning "all knowledge" (Gutek, 2011, p. 132) or teaching all things to all men. This idea of education for all could only be achieved through the use of vernacular language. Thus, Comenius tried to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor by opening a vernacular school (Chaube & Chaube, 2002).

#### 3.2 Language is Culture:

Another philosophical underpinning that could be appended in the use of the vernacular language is the idea that language is culture. According to Spackman (2012), the cultural reproduction process would be impossible without language, for "language is inseparable from culture" (p. 2).

Further, the passing of culture from one generation to the next is the hallmark of Confucianism which was founded by Confucius. He believed that the teacher was the guardian of the cultural heritage whose main role was to transmit it to the younger generation (Gutek, 2011). Language defines an individual, a group of people, and a nation (Valeriano, 2015); it would be a tragedy if one would lose it. Today, most languages and dialects in the world are on the verge of extinction (Pagel, 2011). Mother tongue-based instruction seems to be the answer to this crisis.

#### 3.3 The Bridging Theory:

One of the focal points proponents of mother tongue instruction is claiming is the bridging of the first language to the second language (Crosthwaite, 2014). Theories developed in language acquisition explaining how a child learns or acquires a second language are very similar to those developed in the first language (Harlan, 2000). One of these theories is Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG), claiming that children learned their native language using UG as a support structure (White, 2012). This is based on the fact that there are properties all

human languages share (e.g., syntax); it is in this manner that a child who has a firm grasp of his native language could bridge these properties in learning or acquiring a second language.

### 3.4 English language: The Other Side of the Picture:

John Lennon revolutionized the idea of oneness, as best reflected in his song *Imagine*. Though language was not mentioned in his song, it could be implied. Imagine if we have one language, that would be something, and worldwide unity and peace would be achieved. Aside from these, an enormous amount of money could be saved. Pagel (2011) stressed that the European Union translation alone cost is over 1 billion euros every year. This amount could cause a significant change in education and alleviate poverty in some countries in Asia and Africa.

In the Philippines, proponents of the English language presented their stand on the following grounds. The first is for unification and social integration (Valeriano, 2015). The second is on the observed advantages of the English language which is considered the universal language or the *lingua franca* (Koo, 2008). Finally, the problem to shift away from the English language is a bit difficult for many teachers for they lack the pedagogical knowledge and competence to teach in the vernacular language coupled with the lack of textbooks and other materials (Danday, 2018).

### 4. CONCLUSIONS:

The language or medium of instruction is a crucial factor in education. Without this medium, learning would be difficult, or even downright impossible. But it had never been an issue, not until the advent of universal language. Importantly, sound theories and philosophical foundation of education grounded in the socio-cultural milieu of the learners, and back up with researches, should be at the core in choosing whatever medium of instruction the educational system embraces. Further, assessment and evaluation should be conducted regularly especially after its implementation to gauge the effectiveness of the language used as a medium of instruction, for example, the mother tongue instruction implemented in the Philippine educational system.

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